



Un-Knowing and Rebellion

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October, Vol. 36, Georges Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing (Spring, 1986), 86-88.

Stable URL:

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October is currently published by The MIT Press.

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Un-Knowing and Rebellion

I have, in several talks given in this hall, tried to communicate my experience of un-knowing. Although it is in certain respects a personal one, I nonetheless consider it to be communicable in that it does not seem a priori to differ from that of others, except in a kind of defect which is my own: the consciousness that this experience is that of un-knowing.

It is, of course, obvious that whenever I speak of un-knowing, I must incur the same difficulty, and must each time, therefore, invoke it. But I do, nevertheless, proceed, promptly acknowledging it, for what I shall now develop before you will be, as on other occasions, that paradox, the knowledge of un-knowing, a knowledge of the absence of knowledge.

I intend, as indicated by the title of my talk, to speak of rebellion. I consider that we are enslaved by knowledge, that there is a servility fundamental to all knowledge, an acceptance of a mode of life such that each moment has meaning only in terms of another, or of others to follow. For clarity's sake, I shall present things thus. Naturally I shall fail, as I have done heretofore. But I should like, first of all, to state the measure of my failure. I can, in fact, say that had I succeeded, the contact between us would have perceptibly been of the sort that exists not in work, but in play. I should have made you understand something that is decisive for me: that my thought has but one object, play, in which my thinking, the working of my thought, dissolves.

Those who have followed my thinking as set forth have realized that it was, in a way that is fundamental, in perpetual rebellion against itself. I shall try today to offer an example of this rebellion on a point which is of prime importance relative to those philosophical considerations which form my point of departure.

I shall, in brief, start with the utterance of a general philosophy which I can offer as my own. I must begin with this statement. It's a very crude philosophy, one which must really seem far too simple, as though a philosopher capable of stating commonplaces of this sort bears no relation to the subtle sort of character now known as a philosopher. For this sort of idea might really be anyone's. I do mean that this thought which appears common to me is my

thought. I recall meeting, a long time ago, a young medical intern who held a philosophy of this sort. He never stopped repeating, with an extraordinarily cool self-assurance, one explanatory idea; everything, in his view, came down to the instinct of self-preservation. That was thirty years ago. One is less likely to hear this refrain today. My conception is surely less out of date, and may, despite all, correspond more closely, or somewhat less badly, to the idea of philosophy. It consists in saying that all is play, that being is play, that the idea of God is unwelcome and, furthermore, intolerable, in that God, being situated outside time, can be only play, but is harnessed by human thought to creation and to all the implications of creation, which go contrary to play (to the game).

We find, moreover, in this respect, a blunting of that most ancient register of human thought which remains largely within the idea of play in its consideration of the totality of things. This blunting is, however, by no means peculiar to Christian thought. Plato still considered the sacred action, that very action which religion offers man as a possibility of sharing in the essence of things, as a game. Nevertheless, Christianity, Christian thinking remains the screen separating us from what I shall call the beatific vision of the game.

It seems to me to be our characteristically Christian conception of the world and of man in the world which resists, from the very outset, this thought that all is play.

The possibility of a philosophy of play—this presupposes Christianity. But Christianity is only the spokesman of pain and death. From this point of departure, and given the conditions of space and duration within which being exists, one could see a series of problems arising. To these I shall give no further consideration. Another question arises; if one sets play against the expediency of action, the game in question can be termed a lesser one. The problem: if this is a lesser game, it cannot be made the end of serious action. We cannot, on the other hand, attribute to useful action any end other than that of the game. There is something amiss here.

Let us say that we can take some edge off the game. It is then no longer a game.

The philosophy of play appears, in a manner that is fundamental, to be truth itself, common and indisputable; it is, nevertheless, out of kilter in that we suffer and we die.

The other solution: we can think and be the game, make of the world and of ourselves a game on condition that we look suffering and death in the face. The greater game—more difficult than we think—the dialectic of the master who confronts death. Now, according to Hegel, the master is in error, it is the slave who vanquishes him, but the slave is nonetheless vanquished, and once he has vanquished the master, he is made to conquer himself. He must act not as master, but as rebel. The rebel first wants to eliminate the master, expel him from the world, while he, at the same time, acts as master, since he braves death. The rebel's situation is thus highly equivocal.

Rebellion's essential problem lies in extricating man from the obligation of the slave.

For the master, the game was neither greater nor lesser. The rebel, however, revolting against the game which is neither lesser nor greater, who must reduce the game to the state of a lesser one, must see the necessity of the greater one, which is essentially rebellion against the lesser, the game's limit. Otherwise, it is the lesser man who prevails over reason.

The rebel is thus constrained, because he has had to accept death. He must go to the limit of his revolt; he has certainly not rebelled in order to complete his submission. From this follows the awareness that the worst is a game, a negation of the power of suffering and death—cowardice in the face of this sort of prospect.

I think, though, that this time I have found my way out of the first proposition of a philosophy of play by passing to the game itself [*crossed out*: and no one will be surprised if] I've set a trap.

It thus appears that we extricate ourselves from the philosophy of play, that we reach the point at which knowledge gives way, and that un-knowing then appears as the greater game—the indefinable, that which thought cannot conceive. This is a thought which exists only timidly within me, one which I do not feel apt to sustain. I do think this way, it is true, but in the manner of a coward, like someone who is inwardly raving mad with terror. Still, what can so cowardly a reaction. . . .*

November 24, 1952

* Text breaks off in this manner. —trans.